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The Glass Palace: A South Asian memoir of cultural cannibalism

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ABSTRACT

“*The Glass Palace*: A South Asian memoir of cultural cannibalism” is an essay that pays particular attention to British colonial decimation and exploitation of South Asian identity. I first begin by delving into 19th and 20th-century Indian history, taking into account the 300-year hierarchical dichotomy in Britain’s relationship with India. I use the larger, expansive historical context to move into an analysis of the *The Glass Palace* (2000) by Amitav Ghosh, an Indian novelist. This renown catalog of familial interactions is a multigenerational novel that has received multiple awards including but not limited to, the Frankfurt eBook Award in 2001, New York Times Notable Books of 2001, and Grand Prize for fiction. The novel reveals the erasure of native Indian and Burmese culture in the course of British colonialism and, demonstrates how as a result, this historical context saw the creation of a hybrid South Asian identity. By deconstructing the family memoir that spans across centuries and nation-states, I examine these individual shifts in one’s identity. The representations of memory catalog the ceaseless process of hybridization within the Burmese-Indian family; the process of hybridization takes the form of erasing traditional South Asian cultural values, capitalist motives, and western concepts of liberty and freedom. Through the means of this essay, I contribute to the ongoing study of hybrid identities—arguing the proliferation of westernized hybrid individuals to be a material effect of colonialism.

KEYWORDS

Amitav Ghosh, Colonialism, Hybridity, Cannibalization, Culture, Identity

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) is a multigenerational novel that expands outward, across nations, from the nuclear family-unit. In showing the concurrent exploitation, decimation, and alienation of his multidimensional family, Ghosh reproduces an array of Indian memories –depicting South Asians as peoples unified and bound through colonial threads. While India and Britain have an entangled history from the start of 16th-century British expansionism, the action of the historical novel follows from 19th and 20th century India and Burma. After a review of the larger historical context in which the novel is engulfed, I will show the synchronous erasure and remaking of identity as it pertains to 19th to 20th centuries. Ghosh's long historical interpolations tethers the identities of his characters to a common, family experience. Thus, Amitav Ghosh, an Indian born writer, chronicles a family history by depicting its response to the broader displacement of South Asian culture. By first contextualizing *The Glass Palace* and then tracing its individual characters, I confront the accumulation of Indian historical events that produce a dynamic, multicultural Indian identity.

I begin by delving into 19th and 20th-century Indian history, taking into account the broad and overarching hierarchical dichotomy constructed by the West through its relations with the East. Specifically, I analyze India's 300-year colonial experience – an expansive instance of orientalism. In postcolonial studies, this term was popularized by Edward Said's iconic 1975 book of the same name. It refers to the West's inaccurate cultural view of the East, one that typically depicted the Orient as primitive, uncultivated, uncivilized. These western constructions hybridize, a process in which multiculturalism impacts and creates new cultural forms. Homi Bhaba in "Signs Taken for Wonders" looks at the transformative nature of colonial cultural collisions. I use this term as it denotes a convergence between multiple cultures, but also is result of colonial control. By explicating the regulation of Indian life by the British capitalist-colonial regime, *The Glass Palace* reveals the cultural recoding of Indian society, and ultimately, Indian identity. Although Ghosh's novel looks to both Indian and Burmese histories, I principally focus on that of India as an instance of social deconstruction; the British conquest and manipulation of India mirrors that of Burma. Ghosh will concentrate on this Burmese interaction with British forces as it parallels India's early history with Britain.

The intersecting decimation of Indian and Burmese identity is rooted in the colonial binary opposition between the rational European powers and their allegedly irrational Eastern counterparts. Wrought in this binary, postcolonial theory purports to break Western measurement

of the East against what they are not. The “post” in “postcolonial” demarcates a linear historical timeline of a political period following and reflecting on previous waves of imperialism. It refers to a period after occupation, fixating on the repercussions of the dismantling of existing power structures by the “distant imperial power” (Kumar 3). Using a postcolonial lens, I look at the resultant internalized need for Indians to distance themselves from their inferior culture.

Ghosh’s multigenerational novel exemplifies this systematic debasement of Indian culture, denying the binary complete power over explaining India’s cultural deterioration. Ghosh refuses the term “post-colonial,” stating that his disdain for the term stems from it “describ[ing] [subjects] as a negative,” focusing on “being a successor state to a colony” rather than the “reality that [they] do inhabit” (Kumar). His repudiation of the term “post-colonial” paves the way for him to discuss the myriad of identities, in Indian history and in the intimate family he creates. These moments of multicultural interconnection overturn the borders that postcolonial theory inscribes. Recognizing the formulation of post-colonial critique to erase the distinct realities and existing structures of places¹, Ghosh shows hybridity as a refusal of both colonialism to post-colonialism *and* East to West binary relationships.

How, then, does Ghosh’s novel, ridden with colonial interaction with the Indian world, counter the encoded simplified binary of systematically oppressed? This dialogue against postcolonial epistemology, I contend, takes the form of proliferated, hybrid identities. Here, the multitudinous identities and memories that react against imperial Britain are fluid and borderless², complicating the certainties produced through colonialism. In the formation of hybridity or the “passage between fixed identifications”³ Ghosh remarks on the subsequent “cannibalization” of Indian culture. In an interview conducted by Vijay Kumar, Ghosh believes that by “enter[ing] the minds of nineteenth-century Indians” and experiencing “imperialism [as it] breaks the overarching structure of society,” Indian culture is subjugated (Kumar 3). The internal destruction of one’s cultural makeup is what Ghosh deems as the “cannibalization of Indian culture” (Ghosh 467). Cannibalization, or the decision to eat and destroy one’s own

¹ In Ghosh’s interview with Vijay Kumar, he keeps the “places” intentionally ambiguous, not wanting to restrict colonialism’s impact to nations.

² Tariq Jazeel in *Postcolonial Spaces and identities* places emphasis on the hybrid cultural formations but later rethinks hybridity as a language of splitting, partitioning, or further subjugating the individual. Unlike Jazeel, I do not see hybridity as a mere fusion, but a compilation of experience and memory.

³ Mentioned in Tariq Jazeel’s *Postcolonial Spaces and identities*, but quoted from Homi Bhaba’s 1994 essay, *The Location of Culture*.

culture, is an ongoing process of self-erasure of Indian identity. Ghosh's 2000 novel produces dialogue between the historic-colonial process that catalyzes a consumption of culture, thus producing the transformative, hybrid person. The aforementioned hybrid identity is an irremediable process of colonial dislocation of culture.

First wave of British colonialism

Demarcating the progression of British imposition in waves allows us to see British motives as instigating the cannibalization of Indian culture. Through an intentional recoding of India's social and ethnic diversity, the British-installed hierarchy imposes western values. This measure of Indian value promoted the Indian's self-erasure of their culture.

Before full-fledged waves of British imperialism exploited and decimated the harmonious plurality of Indian culture, the British East India Company cautiously established trading agreements with the Mughal Emperors of the 16th and 17th century. Though not explicitly imperialistic, British interactions with the Mughal Empire were intended to gain profit and advantage in the European market. The old British East India company, a joint-stock company, symbolized 16th-century international trading partnerships. This desire to expand trade eastward coincided with the 16th-century breakdown of British feudal governments, along with the subsequent rise of capitalism. Yet, the British were limited to a few forts in Southern, coastal India. The trading restrictions imposed on the British momentarily upheld a *mutually* beneficial partnership between Asia and Europe. However, British traders, having amassed fortunes from foreign markets, spurred a race to establish a monopoly on Indian goods.

In the years preceding the stringent British control and regulation of subcontinental trade, the 16th-century Mughal Empire was at its peak of economic growth and vitality. Flourishing in the trade of textiles, specifically cotton, the South-Asian subcontinent consolidated and expanded its political and economic powers. The centralized Mughal state experienced immense prosperity through trade with the West and allowed a degree of autonomy to the merchant class (Bose 35). This Muslim Empire bolstered South Asian culture: it recreated and illustrated famous Hindu epics such as the Ramayana, utilized Persian and Urdu languages in court, and drew on Islamic sharia law to preserve order. However, as Mughal control gradually weakened, India reverted to a decentralized regional distribution of powers. Through commercialization, these decentralized, autonomous regional groups continued the economic growth (Bose 41). In essence, the decline

of Mughal power did not lead to a degradation of the economy; rather, the economy was “characterized by general buoyancy and creativity despite some key weaknesses and contradictions” (Bose 42). Here, we see a flourishing subcontinent that regionally built upon the legitimacy of the Mughal hegemonic culture with its diverse practices.

Second-wave Imperialism

Despite the vitality of decentralized India, British seizure of Indian political power in the 18th century marked the start of second-wave British imperialism. The reinstated, powerful British East India company drove a campaign of military expansion, conquering small, individual kingdoms. British seizure of the functioning, decentralized India homogenized the rich cultural, geographical, and religious differences. Opposing India’s lenient and individual practice of cultural systems, Britain strictly enforced cultural divides. A part of this consolidation of the subcontinent was through British regulation of the caste system. Taken from ancient Vedic culture, British forces concretized the Vedic’s established system of separation, policing the system of class divisions. The stratification of Indian occupation hardened under British power as the British mechanized the system to control Indian relations. Thus, the British unification of India adds emphasis on social organization—a central mechanism of British rule. Britain’s pretended altruism to advance and ‘civilize’ India ruptures the diversity and quality of Indian life: the 1770 great Bengal famine, the depression of Golden-age port cities, the suppression of internal and external trade, and overall “economic stagnation” resulted from the British exploitation of Indian states (Bose 52).

Rather than introducing a Western form of governing typical in colonized states, the British utilized and wielded established cultural and political constructs for colonial domination. The East India Company utilized India’s men and internal governing system to advance their political control—“legally arbitrating [their] Empire by India’s own laws and customs, rather than any imported from a ‘superior’ Europe” (Washbrook 483). The structure is “cannibalized” or turned against the Indian, taking the shape of physical dominance. South Asian power and culture were further dismantled by British authorities using Indians to conquer other South Asian counterparts. This system of utilizing more Indians than British in the military “assur[ed] the dominance of the higher-level British administrators” and the stagnant pawn-like state of the colonized (54). Pitting Indians against Indians, the British creates a form of antagonism within

Indian subgroups. This violently destructive British manner of political dominance standardized Indian constructs and marginalized cultural practices.

Finally, British colonial rhetoric that constructs Indians as inferior, simultaneously creates a gap between Indian culture and that of the British. The desire to please and achieve western economic, social, and political success promoted an erasure of Indian culture. The British East India Company's process of inserting itself in the Indian market decimated the natural industries of the subcontinent, and formalized a practiced inequality through the means of eroding the once dominant Indian hegemony. Not only was native culture suppressed and devalued through its own institutions, but also the Indians who fought on behalf of British authority installed British supremacy in each land conquered. The South Asian soldier became a readily disposable pawn who forfeited his own culture to please the British, cannibalizing his own culture in the process⁴.

Creating South Asia

Moving from the imperial structure of domination, I turn to the modern-day, twentieth-century composition of the subcontinent. Modern-day India is a result of two waves of British colonial influence that unifies the landmass bound by the Indian Ocean to the south and the Himalayan mountain range to the north. Between those two boundaries, the subcontinent is home to an array of distinct ethnic and cultural groups. The British feat in consolidating India subsequently disregarded natural boundaries to flatten cultural and religious variances. The colonizer's ability to maintain regional order by unifying diverse regions and identities created a supracultural⁵ identity from multiple, distinct identities.

Coined five decades ago, after British erasure of the Indian diversity, "South Asia" is the most recent proper name for the subcontinent. This "origin geographical expression" differs from the Indian subcontinent's previous colonial names such as British India and Hindustan (Bose 3). The change in name correlates to India's autonomy; the fall of the British Raj in 1947 marks a shift in India's political autonomy. Similarly, after the military coup in 1989, Burma underwent a change in nomenclature from Burma to Myanmar. Myanmar's name-change parallels the modern coinage of "South Asia" in that it removes overt evidence of colonialism. Language and its

⁴ I will offer a clearer picture of this cannibalization upon a discussion of the military in *The Glass Palace*.

⁵ This term is my own, referring to the way in which British authority created a single, transcending culture.

production of the colonial subject manifest most effectively in the power of naming. The names “British India,” “Hindustan,” and “Burma” created identities driven by the colonial master. Thus, reidentification appears as an attempt to recuperate lost identity. In spite of this refusal of subjection through language, not all South Asians recuperate their culture uniformly. In the case of Myanmar, the symbolic removal of the name “Burma” means reidentification through emphasis on native Burmese culture; the nations comprising the South Asian political alliance consolidate in reaction to British imperial collapse. Despite this shift in nationhood and identification, I use South Asia as a modern term that incorporates the colonial history of Burma but avoids pigeonholing Myanmar in a form of political consolidation. In my analysis of *The Glass Palace* I aim to further show various identifications with colonial histories that encompass South Asia—namely Burma and India. Thus, my use of South Asia denotes Ghosh’s ability to transcend borders and nations, forming a common history that situates Burma and India at the nucleus of the colonial enterprise.

Particularly, the term “South Asia” unites countries with a common background: a signifier of supranational unification. The seven nation-states which comprise modern South Asia include India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. South Asia, rather than purely serving as a political marker, simultaneously indicates a regional unification between countries with the common colonial denominator (Bose 3). The present-day political consolidation of South Asian histories is recognized as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Not only does this geopolitical union implemented in 1983 unify itself on the world stage, it isolates itself from its South-East Asian counterparts. Myanmar, however, in separating from British control, broke from its historic identity as part of British India and disentangled itself from South Asia and British India alike. Despite Myanmar’s modern identification and desire to separate from South Asia, Ghosh chronicles the family’s memories and interactions with the ancient Burma. Even as the state of South Asian nationhood shifts throughout the generations, the nation takes a secondary role to family memory.

The Glass Palace and Displacement of the Nation

I look at *The Glass Palace* as representing the continuing material effects of India’s colonial past. By interweaving adjacent narratives, *The Glass Palace* chronicles British colonial domination in India. The novel reveals the erasure of native Indian and Burmese culture in the

course of British colonialism and, demonstrates how as a result, this historical context saw the creation of a hybrid South Asian identity. One of the hybrid identities the novel fleshes out is that of Rajkumar, an Indian-Burmese orphan. Rajkumar's narrative is part of Ghosh's historic timeline: The British seizure of Burma on November 14, 1885 and postcolonial realities in 1996 India bookend the novel. Ghosh's emphasis on periods of South Asian history constructs a vision of the past that connects significant moments that highlight the shaping of South Asian diversity.

The displacement of the nation—more specifically, Burma—lies in the transition between first and second wave British imperialism. Mirroring the 18th-century British imperialism in India, the British East India company conquers the centralized Burmese kingdom through militant means. As a consequence, Burmese tradition and plural practice erodes. In this portion, I use *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh to demarcate histories of fictional characters—all of whom are interconnected by witnessing the systematic decay of their culture. The British conquest of Burmese land catalyzes change in identity; here, I see this change as it pertains to Rajkumar, Saya John, and the Royal Family.

Ghosh's novel focuses on Rajkumar, an eleven-year-old Indian with “teeth as white as his eyes and skin the color of polished hardwood” (Ghosh 1). This solitary boy lurks in the shadows of Burmese society, arriving in Mandalay after the boat on which he worked needed repairs. Displaced from his job as an errand-boy on the sampan and his native Indian homeland, Rajkumar walks inland to find work in the Burmese “golden land” where everyone is said to be well-fed and have jobs. As a displaced Indian, Rajkumar is pushed to the peripheries of Mandalay culture; his Hindustani language and *kaala* or dark appearance ostracize him from the rest of Burmese society. Upon learning about Rajkumar's orphanage, Ma Cho—a half-Indian, half-Burmese woman hires him. Rajkumar seeks to work with Ma Cho if only to receive no more than three meals a day and a place to stay, and despite being hired by her, Rajkumar is not fully accepted into Burmese society. His unassimilable Indian identity in a homogenous Burmese society pushes the eleven-year-old Rajkumar to the fringes of the “bamboo-wall shacks” on the city streets of Burma. Thus, Rajkumar represents an identity that is at a geographical crossroads—the point of intersection between both Indian and Burmese cultures.

Saya John, a Christian contractor sexually involved with Ma Cho, is Rajkumar's first exposure to a plural, multifaceted identity— “one that does not belong anywhere, either by the water or on land” (9). Saya speaks broken Hindustani connecting himself to Rajkumar's roots,

but also drawing on a connection that runs deeper than their current location in Mandalay: their commonality in being outsiders. Just like Rajkumar, Saya John is an orphan. He was brought up by “men from everywhere—Portugal, Macao, Goa” in a town called Malacca, then moved to Singapore to work in a hospital. The soldiers in Singapore, Saya John recounts, noticed his ambiguous and intermixed identity and asked, “how is it that you, who look Chinese and carry a Christian name, can speak our language?” (9). Like the Indian soldiers in the hospital, eleven-year-old Rajkumar sees how Saya John is an outsider: “His clothes were those of [a] European and he seemed to know Hindustani, and yet the cast of his face was that of neither a white man nor an Indian” (Ghosh 8). Physically, Saya John does not conform to either the Burmese or Indian society, but rather is a convergence of Eastern and Western characteristics. In addition, his clothes mark his western identity, reflecting a balance between his Indian heritage and his future western-capitalist success.

Not only does he represent an amalgamation of cultures, Saya John’s sexual relationship with Ma Cho is interracial. Ma Cho regards Saya John as a man in a position of power, nervously expressing to Rajkumar how he is her “teacher...he knows about many things,” speaking in “small, explosive bursts” (8). Though Ma Cho is self-sufficient, single-handedly running her restaurant, she is subordinate in relation to Saya John’s worldly experiences. Thus, Saya exerts his worldly knowledge and power over both Rajkumar and Ma Cho, introducing Rajkumar to both foreign and familiar values.

Even so, Saya John’s desires are foreign to Rajkumar, a boy who has only experienced hard labor that yields little reward. While working for Ma Cho, Rajkumar sees a self-made, hardworking woman who limits herself to self-enforced domestic servitude “sitting at her fire, frying baya-gywa” for her restaurant (8). In contrast, Saya John ceaselessly capitalizes on the Burmese teak industry, since his flourishing business feeds on British economic interests in that industry—a confluence between regional and global markets. The desire for prosperity and capitalist success drives Saya John. He indulges in material goods and markers of status – buying a ticket on a first-class steamer, owning a large house, and sending his son to America. Though his desires aren’t overtly capitalistic— not being seen by Rajkumar as “a man who had a great craving for luxuries”—Saya strives to extend his earnings (58). Furthermore, his success supersedes societal limitations on Eastern economic success. Saya John is a man with close aspirational ties to the colonial master: he integrates overtly British values such as the English

language, Christianity, Western dress, and self-earned success with his Burmese-Indian heritage. Seeing in Saya John someone whose profits yield a life to be proud of, Rajkumar begins to see colonial-capitalist associations as a way of demarginalizing and elevating his social reputation.

Saya John represents the dominance of colonial-capitalist values in his historical context simultaneously questioning the structure of South Asian society under British rule. Treading the border between white and brown, civilized and uncivilized, Saya does not accept his own colonization. His rejection of British power comes to light when Burma is occupied by Indian sepoy soldiers standing in as British soldiers. These battle-hardened troops spark a cross-cultural antagonism –South Asia begins to internally crumble as neighbors are pushed to fight one another. The Indian men who fight, Saya John tells Rajkumar, are peasants who for a few “annas a day...allow their masters to use them as they wish[ed], to destroy every trace of resistance to the power of the English” (Ghosh 26). Saya John looks at the world with skeptical clarity, cutting through the opaque motives of those soldiers. The fight these soldiers have stem from a place of innate, pride-less submission, of selfish innocence. Saya John views their quick subordination and betrayal of their nation as a form of cannibalization⁶ rooted in innocent evil, an evil more dangerous and potent than that of their English masters.

The British-Indian destabilization of the Burmese power and monarchy early in the novel provides Rajkumar the impetus to move toward capitalistic benefits. He desires the stable life that capitalism provides, performing as someone of the West to gain social and political mobility and status. The working-class Burmese society gives us a polarizing outlook on the manners involved in coping with British power: the Indian soldiers fight with “murder in their hearts” while Rajkumar fights for a place in any society (26). Comparing the two men, Saya John juxtaposes Rajkumar’s hunger for knowledge against the other Indians who obliterated their own communities for short-term monetary gain. While Rajkumar strives to participate in innovative, self-earned success, his male Indian counterparts collectively decimate their own blood for profit. Here, Saya John’s observations on the youth of India provide context to the consumption of South Asia by their very own citizens.

The very same British-Indian soldiers in which Saya John refers are the same Indians who fight for British control of Burma. This hostile British-Indian takeover quickly defeats

⁶ A reference to the first portion of my essay in which I define “cannibalization” as the active decision to eat and destroy one’s own culture.

Burmese weaponry and soldiers, placing the smaller Burmese state at a great disadvantage. Unable to keep up the fight, Burmese troops surrender after only a few days. In the process of their warfare, the troops leave the royal family exposed and vulnerable to British rule. The defeat of Burmese troops removed the Burmese king from power. Transferring from old, royal Burmese traditional power to imperial rule, the native overarching structure of Burmese society breaks down. The disintegration of the Burmese culture coincides with the exile of the Burmese royal family. King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat's exile serves as a metaphor for the overarching erasure of royal Burmese culture.

In many ways, King Thebaw was an extension of Burmese cultural values, since he was the symbol of unity. The enforced displacement of the royal family— King Thebaw, Queen Supayalat, the four Princesses and a handful of servants – from Burma to India altered core Burmese traditions. Their passage from Mandalay to Rangoon to Madras and later Ratnagiri increasingly distanced the king and queen from the place in which they called home. The movement across land and sea symbolically represented the intersecting of geographic displacement with political and cultural transformation. This displacement/transformation disconnected the Burmese royal family from their subjects. At first, King Thebaw noted the mutually dependent relationship between his role as king and his subjects: “It wouldn’t suit [the Burmese], all this moving about. They were not a portable people, the Burmese” (44). The king refers to himself and his people as one entity, expressing his own desire to be stable and stationary. In conjunction with his removal, the King anticipates the “moving about” of the Burmese people. Opposed to the spatial move involved in King Thebaw’s exile, his subjects’ move is figurative in that they begin to break with the once dominant Burmese culture. Just like that of the king, the strength of the subject’s culture succumbs to and is removed by British power.

Just as King Thebaw predicted, the absence of the royal family has an immediate impact on Mandalay, the Royal Burmese city. Immediately after British invasion, Ghosh depicts the city as “a city of Ghosts” with many of the King’s men “staging attacks on occupiers” from the countryside (49). Documented in the novel, the banishment of the King brings immediate chaos and strife when palace soldiers and villagers stage revolts to attempt to reclaim Burmese life. Yet, the passage of time correlates to the urbanization of Mandalay, and when the British renovate the Burmese court as a commercial hub, it seems destined to be the “Chicago of Asia”

(58). The energetic colonial exploitation of resources gives Mandalay a vibrant, bustling human-life while depleting agricultural life for capital benefit. The need for exploitation as a form of advancement takes precedent over tradition. This new, British-led Burmese practice of exploitative agricultural measures with an “energy and efficiency hitherto unheard of” marks a self-consumption, a self-destruction of the Burmese peoples own land and resources (58). The replacement of Burmese traditional values with British capitalistic values gives Burma economic weight, linking Burmese identity with its natural resources. The exploitation of land— in this case, timber—allows Burma to be a profitable British colony. However successful the colony, the Mandalay citizens are severed from their king, their land, and their culture as they knew it.

Queen Supayalat, is the dominant, authoritative Burmese figure – the true proxy of her people. Her palace, her possessions, and her subjects are all manifestations of her sovereignty. While King Thebaw passively accepts defeat, Queen Supayalat fights to preserve her and her husband’s values. Her love for King Thebaw and his “ineffectual good nature seemed to inspire a maternal ferocity in her” (33). This “fierceness” and passion paired with “guile and determination” are exemplified in Queen Supayalat “stripping her own mother of her powers...and ridding King Thebaw of his rivals” (33). She dominates and kills to protect her King’s position in the palace, and when the British begin their advancement toward Burma, she creates an army. We see Queen Supayalat’s maternal ferocity arise when Burmese citizens pillage and enter the palace. She fights the loss of her material possessions and in defeat, remains steady and confident. Her confidence and audacity in chastising her once-inferior subjects conjure the first tangible bond between the Queen and her people. Queen Supayalat’s powerlessness moves the townspeople to “entrust her with the burden of their own inarticulate defiance” (30). She fights to protect the previous royal hegemony, screaming and exerting herself as superior. In this chaotic political moment, she refuses her debased position.

Supayalat’s fight does not stop after her displacement. In place of practicing sovereignty over her kingdom and state, she exerts power over her home domain. Wielding a hierarchy between her, the servants, and the townspeople, the Queen assumes her monarchical position in Ratnagiri. Despite living in a shabby house, her enforcement of forms of royal sovereignty preserves her core identity. Further, the British Collectors who come and go from Ratnagiri visit the house in fear of the Queen. She preserves the spirit of Mandalay protocol, not acknowledging the British Collectors adamant in their refusal of performing “the shiko”—the act of bowing that

physically places the subject in a lowered position in relation to his sovereign (91). Queen Supayalat's anger amplifies when the British refuse her their respect. In her anger, she greets the stunned collectors into her shabby home with a "proud-thin lipped smile" of defiance (91). Disregarding those officials who deny her respect, Supayalat refuses to submit herself or her culture to inferiority. The manner in which she practices Burmese tradition within the house and allows the house to decay to reflect British negligence is Queen Supayalat's resistance to British imperialism.

The British dethronement of the Burmese royal family transports the family to a downtrodden Indian bungalow called the Outram House. The King and Queen's movement from their regal, isolated Burmese palace to the vacant Indian bungalow debases the family's quality of life. Being placed in a common, shabby house, the royal family is removed from their position of power and authority. Functioning as symbolic of the rise and fall of Burmese royalty, these two abodes represent two distinct moments in Burmese history. While the palace represents the height of Burmese strength and power, the Outram House in India signifies the dismantlement of Burmese superior authority. Yet, however symbolically polar these two households appear, they both attempt to isolate and preserve the culture of their inhabitants; in other words, each household provides a barrier between the royals and the community that engulfs them. Just as the royal palace secludes Burmese royalty from commoners, the Outram House encloses and provides a barrier between the Burmese culture inside and the surrounding Indian village life. When disease forces Ratnagiri society to move up the hill, closer to the Outram House, the Outram House can no longer preserve Burmese identity. A liminal state between Burmese and Indian culture, the house reveals the decay of Burmese hegemonic power. Illuminating the debased status of the once-esteemed Burmese family, the royalty becomes the nucleus of a low-class Indian shantytown.

If the Burmese culture inside the Outram House is slowly intermixing with that of Ratnagiri society, then the four Burmese Princesses of the house become products of the emerging dynamic culture. The cultural memory of their familial strength, of usurpation, and royal power fades with the progression of time away from Burma. This dissipation of Burmese culture manifests in the Princesses' change in clothes from royal Burmese "aingyis and htameins" to Indian saris. Unlike their expensive Burmese items, the Indian saris worn were "not expensive or sumptuous but the simple green and red cottons of the district" (67). Dressing like

Ratnagiri citizens is the Princesses' own manner of expressing their circumstance. A shift in sartorial choices most commonly is an expression of material circumstance, and in this case, the replacement of ornate royal garb with simple clothes represents the debasement of the Princesses' social and individual identity. The simple cottons of the masses reach the isolated Outram House, and the Princesses begin to resemble "Ratnagiri school girls" (67). Adorned in the same material as the masses, the Princesses emulate their Ratnagiri environment, distancing themselves from their Burmese culture.

Though slowly assimilating into Ratnagiri culture, under the domain of the "stern" and "unmoving" Queen Supayalat, the Princesses remain artifacts of royal Burmese culture. The function of the Princesses is twofold; they serve as Burmese tokens of the past *and* are subjects of the Queen's tyrannical household rule. The Queen oversees the Princesses' marriages, not seeing fit the intermarriage between the "true-born Konbaung Princess" and the remaining eligible Burmese bachelors. Securing her husband's position as King, she "decimated her dynasty by massacring all of Thebaw's potential rivals" (98). The massacre of her own royal blood deters the limited bachelors from marrying into the Queen's family. For the Queen, any marriage regardless of their lineage would defile the Princesses' pure, royal bloodline. In doing so, the Queen prevents the British Collectors from choosing husbands for her daughters, an assertion of her last remaining sovereign power. In her steadfast decision to maintain Burmese hegemony within the household, she mandates her daughters to place family first. As we will see with the Second Princess, the act of abandoning the Burmese family and culture results in the Queen disowning her.

While the First Princess does not marry a commoner, she succumbs to her libidinal desires and becomes pregnant with the coachman, Mohan-bhai's child. The First Princess's pregnancy severs her from both traditional expectations of Burmese marriage and the British desire to contain Burmese royal-blood. According to the British "teachers," the Princess's pregnancy with a "half-caste bastard" brings with it the "smell of miscegenation⁷". Finally, this prospect of mixing races "alarms" and "awakens" the British to "the enormity of what they have done to this family" (149). Unlike the British "teachers," the Queen accepts the change in

⁷ Ghosh uses the controversial term "miscegenation" to represent the mixing of caste and blood in this particular instance. The American context has very distinct implications—signaling a historic ethnic and racial intermixing between white and non-white peoples.

tradition, pardoning her daughter and accepting the child. This acceptance of change accompanies her disdain for the hypocrisy of British rule. The Queen states to the British Collector how the Kings of Burma are seen as “subjects of the barbarity” from the British who “rules by laws,” but neglects to grant King Thebaw a trial by the law (130). The Queen propagandizes her daughter’s pregnancy by publicly handling the affairs and reveals injustice in British legal procedures. The pregnancy is a manifestation of the “rule of the law” in which the Burmese royalty are subject to British subversion of their own set of laws (Ghosh, Amitav & Chakrabarty, Dipesh).

Wielding her power through the family’s mixture of race and class, the Queen forces British legal procedure. Whereas before the child each member woke “to the same sounds, the same voices, the same sights, the same faces,” faced with the humiliation of the royal deterioration, the British build a new palace fit for Burmese royalty (101). In countering the British values of maintaining “neatly separated races” in South Asia, the child frees the family from the Outram House (149). As the impure child liberates the Burmese royalty from their imprisonment in the Outram House, one could conclude that twenty years of British neglect had accumulated to produce the “half-caste bastard-child” that saves the royal family (101).

Whereas the First Princess in her pregnancy defies tradition, yet dutifully stays with her family, the Second Princess altogether abandons the palace. The Second Princess’s decision to elope with a Burmese commoner and to hide herself away in the Residency marks the beginning of the end of her royal life. Separating herself from her royal stature, the Second Princess becomes an entity distinct from the family unit. The King, in his final days, sends the Second Princess a note pleading with her to come home. His impending death seemingly responds to the Princess’s absence, but the Queen “let it be known that the Second Princess would never again be permitted to enter her presence” (177). Here, the Queen authoritatively banishes the Princess from sight though the King does not want such a banishment. Because the Princess puts love and marriage over her familial bond, the Queen revokes the Princess’s right to be part of that family. Further, once the daughter strays from Burmese beliefs of “good” and “decent” behavior, the Queen cleanses her of the family (183). The Princess’s elopement is her choice to abandon her Burmese identity. Thus, the correlation between the Second Princess’s removal conjoined with the passing of the last Burmese King symbolizes the continuing erasure of Burmese identity.

The First and Second Princesses both defy their family by moving to India. As the Queen

makes the journey back to Burma in 1919 shortly after the death of the King, the First Princess is confronted with the dilemma to perform her duties as a wife or to fulfill her duties as the eldest royal daughter. She chooses to defy her family and abandon Burma to live in India. With her small family, the eldest Princess settles on the outskirts of Ratnagiri. Similarly, the Second Princess and her husband live in Calcutta before moving to a “hill-station” (183). Both daughters seek solace in the “outskirts” or “hill” country of Indian society, a position of isolation. The two younger sisters follow the Queen and form a life under the shadow of the former Queen in her former Burmese royal territory. Due to their submission to the reign of their mother and their inability to understand and experience pure royal Burmese culture, the Third and Fourth Princesses are erased from the narrative. The emphasis is on the defiant siblings who represent a partitioning of identity and of the family.

This section has aimed to unfold the steady erosion of Burmese culture as it relates to the displacement of Burmese rule. The individuals of the royal family, and those altered by the fall of the royal family relate to their immersion in Indian life in distinct ways, either following the rule of the Queen or relinquishing their titles. This storyline serves as a platform for the mapping of systematic changes in Burmese identity, leading to the creation of an Indian-Burmese cross-culture.

Intermediate, Multicultural Identity

I now turn from explicating a group of characters who each react distinctly to the shift in their society to focusing on Dolly, the royal servant-girl. Contrasting the enforced exile of the Princesses and Royal Family, Dolly— “a timid, undemonstrative child” and the youngest of the Queen’s trusted attendants—willingly follows the Royal Family into exile. Serving as a royal servant, she submits herself to the Queen and the antiquated Burmese royal identity, perpetuating palace customs outside of Burma. In this portion, I look at Dolly’s identity as a stabilizing factor in preserving traditional Burmese customs.

Dolly’s story begins at the height of Burmese monarchy in the Mandalay Palace. As a ten-year-old girl with no memory of her parents or any Burmese village, she is the youngest of the royal maids and has the most success in calming the choleric Second Princess. Taking care of the Second Princess makes Dolly an invaluable asset to the Queen. Despite her duty, Dolly is a child herself. She looks to the Queen as a maternal figure with her “ferocity” and “willful

determination,” even throughout the British military seizure of Mandalay (36). Upon being taken into British captivity, the pregnant Queen remarks that she cannot rest, “point(ing) to Dolly’s red eyes and tear-streaked face” (22). In this instant of political distress, the Queen relieves her own maids from duty, asking other palace servants to take charge. As she relinquishes her own comfort for that of her maids in a moment of crumbling Burmese hegemonic stability, we see the extent to which the Queen relies on and cares for her servants.

Even more important, Dolly’s role in the household appreciates when the royal family becomes distant from Mandalay. Her rule over the other household servants assimilates them into the Burmese culture, her teaching of protocol perpetuates traditional Mandalay rules, and her enforcement of these rules allows the Queen to be treated as a Burmese Queen. Before moving to Ratnagiri’s Outram House, the royal family stays in Madras where the Queen dismisses seven disobedient Burmese servants. Replacing them with local Indian servants, Dolly asks for the old Mandalay rules “the shikoes, the crawling...to be observed” (48). She remarks how “clumsy and inept [the local servants] were,” and she “could never understand why they found it so hard to move about on their hands and knees [in the shiko]” (47). Dolly is unable to sympathize with the foreigners and their struggle to adopt a new culture; her identity is confined to the observance of palace traditions and power and so her job provides the Burmese royalty with a displaced Burmese sanctuary in India.

Her life in exile at The Outram House for approximately nineteen years provides Dolly with a connection to her childhood life in the Royal Glass Palace. Dolly confides in Uma, the British Collector’s wife, about the reason she has decided to stay: “‘And where would I go?... This is the only place I know. This is home’” (102). In living her life as a subdued servant, she is unable to envision a world where she has a future distinct from the Royal Family. Spending time with Uma and reflecting on the Mandalay Glass Palace, a place Dolly truly considers home, creates for Dolly an air of nostalgia for the old days in Burma. Dolly’s nostalgia for the golden-age of Burmese traditional customs binds her to the remains of the old palace. When she constructs the pre-colonial hierarchy of Burmese royalty, she identifies with the antique royal Burmese customs—the only culture she knows. Dolly is slow to adjust to the new realities in Burma, and when she makes the passage back to Burma she grows “increasingly withdrawn” (156). Her apprehension stems from Rangoon being a foreign city, one where she will need to form a new community in which she belongs.

Dolly and Rajkumar: A “miscegenated”⁸ race

Transitioning from individual characters who embody the Burmese past in distinct ways, the family tree begins to interconnect and expand. The two parallel strands of the story, Indian Rajkumar’s life in Burma *and* the Burmese royalty’s exile in India, collide. This entanglement occurs when twenty years after Burmese exile, Indian Rajkumar seeks to reunite with Dolly. Their initial encounter and childhood bond links them to a single memory of pre-British past. Reunited through past events, they produce a generation of multicultural Burmese-Indians that interact with the British imperial-world of the early 20th-century.

Dolly marries Rajkumar, a man from her Burmese childhood, and abandons Ratnagiri with the members of the royal family she has served and followed for many years. Through two juxtaposed moments, British destruction of the Burmese social structure introduces ten-year-old Dolly to Rajkumar. In the course of the two moments, Rajkumar seeks out Dolly: The commoners ransacking the royal palace and the royal procession away from the royal palace connect the two children to a specific memory of Burmese decay. In the first moment, Rajkumar follows Ma Cho into the Royal Glass Palace with the intent to pillage and ransack the previously untouchable palace, and observes the sea of people dismantling the royal jewels. Before entering the woman’s quarters, he is cognizant of the men and women hard at work “digging patterned gemstones,” “cutting wood,” and “prying ivory inlays” (29). Then, his attention diverts from surveying the actions of the multitudinous people and items to the single servant girl: Rajkumar’s eyes “fell on a girl” who was “by far the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld” (30). His motive shifts with his attention: upon seeing the valuable ivory jewelry box “lying forgotten in a corner,” he runs to grab it and gives it away to “the slender little girl” (31). Instead of recuperating items from the palace, he returns the gold jewelry box to the Queen’s servants. Rajkumar forgets about his intention of pillaging the palace and its material possessions because of his infatuation with Dolly.

The second symbolic instance of Burmese hegemonic dissipation is the enforced removal of the Royal Burmese family from their palace. During the procession to herd the royal family to exile, Rajkumar offers Dolly a package of sweets, “pressing a banana leaf packet into her hand” (39). The second exchange of items and goods between two children, strangers to each other,

⁸ Ghosh’s term. Refer to footnote 11.

binds Dolly and Rajkumar together. Rajkumar “raced back into the shadows,” “keeping pace, watching the soldier who was marching beside her” (39). In focusing all of his attention on Dolly’s actions, movements, and location, Rajkumar overlooks the significance of this procession. Unexpectedly coming across Ma Cho weeping, Rajkumar finally looks at Ma Cho’s crying as a sign: “He had been so intent on keeping pace with Dolly that he had paid little attention to the people around him...looking at either side, he could see that every face was streaked with tears” (40). This interchange between two children with distinct circumstances—Dolly forcibly leaving Mandalay and Rajkumar staying in Mandalay—interconnects them to a specific place in time. In both instances where old Burmese power structures are overturned, the childhood worlds of Dolly and Rajkumar merge together. Rajkumar, too enraptured by his exiled-other, fails to notice a moment of the people’s grieving for old Burmese culture. For Dolly and Rajkumar, linked together as they are, the ransacking of the palace and the royal parade away from their home represent the fall of a society that once had offered both orphans refuge.

In 1905, almost twenty years after the complete and total occupation of Burma, Rajkumar travels from Burma to Ratnagiri to pursue Dolly. He offers Dolly a concrete memory of the old Burmese culture and traces her back to their first encounter. After meeting Rajkumar in Ratnagiri, Dolly couldn’t sleep and “kept thinking of home---Mandalay, the palace, the walls of glass” (140). The memory of encountering Rajkumar evokes for her a collection of distinct memories and a loyalty to their shared experience. However, at first, she denies herself and Rajkumar the nostalgic recuperation of the past: “Things might have been different for us in another time, another place. But it’s too late now. This is my home” (142). This dialogue marks a moment when the past seems irreversible. Though Rajkumar offers Dolly an alternative way back to Burma as his wife, she has matured in Ratnagiri, and confronted with a marker of the past, Dolly realizes that the place that links them no longer exists. She reveals the irreversibility of a lost Burmese culture but nonetheless accepts Rajkumar’s proposal and the current Burmese society.

The marriage between Rajkumar and Dolly connects her to an unrecognizable Burmese society. Rajkumar is the representation of the past-monarchical and present-capitalistic Burma. This boy, lifted by political chaos, rises to represent both the old and new society. Caught between following her past memories of Burma and Rajkumar, or exile in her disintegrating culture in India, Dolly chooses her past place over her present identity, and thus she starts her life

with Rajkumar. She marks a clear transition from her life in India to Burma in taking one last look at the Outram House, not “allow[ing] herself to be robbed of this last glimpse of the lane” (148). This last glimpse is the final moment of Dolly’s servitude. She severs bonds with the Burmese Royal practices which she had helped for many years to preserve. This spatial passage to Burma is a reclaiming of her past home; when she follows her childhood memory, moving back to a familiar space that now feels foreign.

Dolly and Rajkumar—a Burmese woman and Indian man— create an interracial population of Burmese-Indians; their internal cultural hybridity surfaces on a biological level. Neel and Dinu, Dolly and Rajkumar’s children, represent a generation temporally distanced from the former Burmese tradition. Despite Neel and Dinu being nurtured by the same parents in a presently hybrid Indian-Burmese society that values British technologies, amongst themselves their hybridity is distinct: While Neel involves himself with his father’s capitalist ventures and innovations, Dinu recaptures the past through his camera.

Neel and Dinu are each given two baby names—one Indian and one Burmese. The practice of giving two names overtly displays ties to the family’s Indian and Burmese identity. An astrologer confirms for the couple that the process of giving each child two names “was custom among Indians in Burma” (168). Here, Burmese and Indian values intersect, creating customs derived from the hybridity between two South Asian cultures. After deliberating, Dolly, Rajkumar, and the astrologer decide that the boy’s “Burmese name would be Sein Win; his Indian Neeladhri—Neel for short” (168). Four years later, the process repeats itself with Dolly’s second pregnancy. Like Neel, the baby boy was given a Burmese and Indian name—Tun Pe and Dinanath— Dinu for short. In the instances of naming their children, Dolly and Rajkumar (and the astrologer) practice their power to consolidate their own familial culture and pass it down to the next generation. Also, in deciding on two names for their children, one representing each culture they are part of, Dolly and Rajkumar forge a multicultural identity for their children. Although they are formally given ties to both cultures and live in Burma, their family calls Neel and Dinu by their respective Indian names. Both boys are formally connected to two cultures and identities, yet they are principally defined by their Indian culture.

Despite being a cohesive representation of their parent’s multiculturalism, the brothers diverge from one another in terms of their physicality. Neel most resembles Rajkumar, being “big and robust, more Indian than Burmese in build and coloring,” while “Dinu, on the other

hand, has his mother's delicate features as well as her ivory complexion and fine-boned slimness of build" (174). Their difference in physical appearance mirrors their differences in personality. Neel is always "filled with energy, boisterousness, and loud-voiced goodwill," and is the object of Rajkumar's fatherly attention (174). Dinu's personality most resembles his mother's soft resilience while he combats his way through "bouts of sickness and ill health" (174). Thus, while Neel resembles his father in that he is visibly stronger and more Indian, Dinu takes after his resilient and soft Burmese mother. I argue that this difference in physicality between Indian and Burmese peoples represents distinct interactions and views of the world. The quiet Dinu works to reconcile his Burmese past through art, while Neel follows in his father's capitalist footsteps.

Though the family is a balance between two distinct personality traits—Rajkumar and Neel's boisterous, robust Indian traits countering the calm resilience of Dinu and Dolly—the bond between Dinu and Dolly creates a divide within the family. This relationship between mother and younger child deepens with Dinu's battling polio. When Dolly instinctively changes the family's sleeping arrangements to sleep with Dinu in her own bed, the voice of the recently deceased King Thebaw enters her dreams: "She understood exactly what he was trying to communicate," urging her to take Dinu to the hospital (175). King Thebaw's phantom-voice saves Dinu from polio. In Dinu's survival, King Thebaw's voice creates a bond between Dolly's past Burmese life serving the royal family and her present family. In protecting Dinu, Dolly becomes absorbed by Dinu's convalescence. Not only does King Thebaw's voice change Dolly's interaction with the present, but the voices in the hospital give her notes of warning: "listening to voices inaudible during the day: the murmurs of anxious relatives; distant screams of pain; women keening in bereavement...spoke to her" (181). Through the voices, Dolly and Dinu live a shared traumatic experience. Their invisible bond divides them from Neel and Rajkumar.

The differences in personality between Neel and Dinu separate the way in which they embrace their own multiculturalism. I first look at Dinu's perspective, one that becomes "more withdrawn" and "years older in maturity" after he regains the ability to walk (178). Dinu distances himself from his nuclear family, preferring solitude over interacting with others. Not only is he "unresponsive and cold" with his father and brother, Uma Dey, Dolly's friend and confidant, in meeting Dinu for the first-time states that he "seem[s] sullen, dour, and such observations he occasionally had to offer were usually tart to the point of sourness" (178, 197). In this passage, we see a Dinu who estranges himself from his family and is unable to interact

with others. He is incapable of verbal expression, speaking in “sharp, staccato bursts,” “swallowing half his words and shooting the rest” (196). Here, language is depicted as a violent form, creating misunderstandings between Dinu and his family. In turn, photography brings Dinu out from the shadows: “Only when Dinu had a camera in his hands he seem[s] to relax a little” (196). Dinu looks at the world through his viewfinder, capturing and ingraining moments onto a piece of film. This innovative, modern form of artistry candidly recreates and preserves real scenes. Photography is a technology that cements Dinu’s ties to past memories.

In his adulthood, Dinu advances to a Rolleiflex twin lens reflex camera from the Brownie camera from Ro & Co. Being able to take images in motion, he appreciates the new cameras for their production of images that capture the most minute details. In this moment, Dinu hones his quiet, introspective character, embracing his self-imposed isolation and seeking solace in his nonconforming personality. He states that even amongst his scarcity of friends he “derives so much pleasure from photography...there was no place more solitary than a darkroom” (241). For Dinu, the process of producing images encompasses his outlook on life. The artistic form of framing and shooting the camera, the processing of photos in the dark room, and executing a picture between the camera as a tool for “you and your imagined desire” gives photos the capacity to speak (438). In his preservation of the past and construction of the future, Dinu draws on modern innovations; this manifests in his lectures given in his photography shop called “The Glass Palace” after World War II. The modern art form of photography provides a newfound method of interpreting politics. In every lecture, Dinu talks about the “new and revolutionary art forms [that] may awaken a people...or challenge old ideals with constructive prophecies of change” (439). Here, Dinu challenges existing ideals and manners of thinking, informing a diverse view of the world. He actively works to inform and create an intellectual society that disrupts the old ideals and “habits of obedience” through the secret language photography provides (438).

Unlike Dinu who takes an oppositional approach to life, Neel follows in his father’s conformist capitalist footsteps. His purpose in life is to work with his father in the timber industry and join the family business. Despite his admanance, Rajkumar initially turns down Neel’s request to learn the family trade in timber, believing “the timber business wasn’t for everyone...especially a city-bred boy like Neel” (234). This rejection sends Neel to the film industry, giving him the drive to double his earnings and prove his father wrong. After gaining

sufficient profit in the film industry and establishing himself as capable of business, Neel aids Rajkumar in his effort to relieve the family from the debt they had accumulated between World War I and World War II: “Neel and Rajkumar were often away, arranging for the disposal of the family’s properties or buying new stocks of teak...The Packard (teak compound) was one of the few disposable possessions that Rajkumar had retained, but it was now driven mainly by Neel” (296). Enjoying work by keeping the family teak business afloat, Neel is driven to become as successful as his father. Rajkumar and Neel possess a “special bond, a particular closeness;” Neel has a child-like trust for his father that “looks into Rajkumar’s [eyes] without reservation, without judgement, without criticism” (353). During World War II, Rajkumar profits off the war, liquidizing his teak industry to maximize his profits. The production of a capitalist economy in India uses the Western imperial method to create a better future for Rajkumar and Neel’s family. The values and systems of the imperial British power now manifest themselves in the ideology of Rajkumar and Neel.

Rajkumar investing all of his money into the war-time teak industry sparked a “lightening in the atmosphere of the house,” giving Neel, Rajkumar, Dolly, and Neel’s wife–Manju–hope for a prosperous future (354). The prospect of becoming more and more prosperous and keeping the family afloat is Rajkumar’s last feat of capitalist glory. Looking at the “yard with its huge, neat stacks of timber,” Rajkumar can’t resist “the spectacle of watching elephants at work” but simultaneously feels nervous watching Neel do hard labor alongside them-- Neel being inexperienced with the equipment and with elephants. As he travels back from a bank after some work there, Rajkumar hears bombs being dropped in Rangoon, aiming for the city’s mills, warehouses, tanks and railway lines (397). These bombs claim all of Rajkumar’s assets–his teak, money, elephants, and even his son, Neel. Instead of being able to use the war for a familial victory, Neel becomes a casualty of the capitalistic venture. Neel’s desire to recreate the past success results in his own demise.

Overall, Neel and Dinu expand on Dolly and Rajkumar’s multicultural family identity, but each react to their own diversity in distinct ways. Neel works to advance his father’s past capitalist success, and subsequently fails due to his inexperience doing menial, physical labor. Dinu, on the other hand, captures cultural and ideological differences between Britain modernity and Indian tradition through photography. His appreciation for a continuity between past and present perspectives drive the communities in his photography shop, “The Glass Palace.”

Befitting the critical and political work he does on behalf of art and its political voice, Dinu's photos are omnipresent in the narrative—even in his absence. As Dinu vanishes into the darkness, leaving behind only the collection of family portraits captured, the memories he has created remain intact. These pictures are placed in the center of the family shrine. Thus, these photos actively relive the memories of their beholders. I will now turn to the meaning of this multigenerational novel and the significance of Ghosh's images.

Political Discourse and *The Glass Palace*

As I have argued, Dinu uses his cultural memory and photographs to emphasize the “cannibalistic” effect of politics on “all of life, all of existence” (467). He consolidates the complex framework of *The Glass Palace*, providing insight on the relationship between his culture and “the politics [that] has invaded everything, spared nothing...religion, art, family...” (467). Thus, Dinu's inability to escape politics serves as a transition from discussing the hybridity of culture in India to the political strife that eats away or cannibalizes the core of society. While Dinu comments on society through modes of art, he doesn't fight for a nationalistic India or Burma. Arjun, Hardy, and Uma, in contrast, commit themselves to a political fight, countering British colonial superiority. Arjun and Hardy serve in the British infantry and Uma Dey serves as the British Collector's wife—all three characters working within British power. After serving under British power, these three characters offer distinct visions of a nationalist India.

Arjun and Hardy physically sign themselves to represent the British Indian army. They do so enthusiastically, feeling privileged to move up the ranks from the Military Academy to the 1st Jat Light Infantry. In enlisting themselves in a society that valorizes the “collection of symbols—colors, flags,” they take their acceptance as a measure of their elevated social standing (227). In corresponding to Manju, his twin sister, Arjun states, “you have to remember that the regiment is going to be my home for the next fifteen to twenty years” (227). Attaching his identity to his position as a soldier, Arjun creates a new life for himself. In emphasizing his “regiment” being his “home,” he removes himself from the constraints of Indian society. In addition, he basks in the ability to participate actively in a new community that functions through British military ranks and honor system.

The desire to be accepted into this strong, “royal” community compels Arjun to conform

to the values of those around him. Coming back home for Neel and Manju's wedding, the family sees the extent of Arjun's conformity and relationship with "the chaps" (242). While each man represents a distinct region of India, they are unified through their need to prepare for combat. The stories and histories they share strengthen their ties to one another, but they are paradoxically "so exaggerated that they seemed to be inventing versions of themselves for collective consumption" (242). Here, community-bonding becomes superficial, a brotherhood that forged through "symbols," "collective lore," and "metaphors that sometimes extended beyond kinship" (242). The men Arjun and Hardy become are "dictated by others... [more specifically] manuals of procedure," since they slowly become pawns in British-Indian agenda (241). Yet, Arjun feels a connection to the small, insignificant tasks assigned to him, a form of false control. Each shared experience, each revulsion, each mouthful of food tests the strength of their unity. Conjoining their self-worth to their proficiency in assimilation to British values, these "brothers" or "chaps" abandon their past-culture to be accepted into the British brotherhood.

After a few whiskies, Arjun believes the unit to be "the first Indians who're not weighed down by the past" (243). Despite the evident inequalities that divide the British and Indian officers, his belief in his mission and the British power is stable. Hardy, a Sikh, from a "family that's been in the army for generations," experiences a racial tension in his position as commissioned officer (244). Only allowed English food, Hardy needed a daily dose of "dal-roti" to get him through the day. It is this act of eating "dal-roti" and maintaining his connection to his culture that turns his people against him: "his home is in the village next to ours. How can you expect us to treat this boy as an officer? Why, he cannot even stomach the food that officers eat" (245). The Indian officers turn against the boy who rises above their rank, rejecting the idea of being ruled by an Indian. Having a British officer as one's superior is "seen as a source of pride and prestige," and a fellow Indian is seen as a lesser value (245). This is a smaller instance of a larger, more potent issue of internalized inferiority. Arjun is cognizant of the institutionalized divisions between Indian and British soldiers, yet he is held by the sense of community the army creates. The ideals of "freedom and equality...something that is dangled on front of their noses to keep them going" is the British mechanism of delegating authority (247). The stability of British power lies in those who are blindly faithful, ensuring innate British superiority. The most debilitating effects of British colonialism lay in Indian and Burmese internalization of British superiority.

Despite the community forged through battle and hardship, when forced to leave India, both Hardy and Arjun question their role defending the British Empire. Being Indian-British soldiers in Singapore, they begin to see their identity as a reflection of India's world-stage reputation. While they once believed themselves to be "part of the privileged, the elite," their experiences in Singapore reveal that they were "impoverished by the circumstances of their country" (302). Hardy and Arjun's identities become deeply intertwined with India, inverting the construction of power they had once believed to have. This unveiling of their own reality, of their own powerlessness, changes the nature of their once-respectable relationship with the British. The revelation of their own personal welfare merges with experienced racism. In their decision to enter the pool with British expatriates, "Within a few minutes they found themselves alone" (299). Their elevated social status in India has no impact on their overt ethnic demarcation. Being Indian is being of the lower class, of being dominated. The extent of their debased, oppressed experiences under British rule becomes apparent when they remove themselves from India.

Finally, the internalized racism toward the Indian soldier creates a dynamic where the meaning of colonial life destroys the soldier's character. Hardy begins to see his "job" working as a soldier as internally conflicting and psychologically suicidal. Upon being called a mercenary, a fool whose "hands belong to someone else's head," Hardy states, "You're risking everything to defend a way of life that pushes you to the sidelines. It's almost as you're fighting against yourself" (351). Remarking on the feeling of destroying one's own culture and life to be used as a tool, a weapon for colonization and destruction, the soldiers begin look past the "grimy curtain of snobbery" (302). In this moment of acknowledging their own foolishness; the soldiers begin to see how they have cannibalized or contributed to their own poverty. Giving up Indian food, villages, and families to join the British, each soldier moves up the false ranks of superiority. Just as they realize their goal of equality with British is unattainable, out of reach, they revolt. Their move to another country unveils the primitivity in being used as an instrument. Faced with a decision to revolt, Arjun dies a hero in his last moments resisting British dominance.

At the end of their lives, these two soldiers fight their way to be free of the colonial institutions that use them as tools. Unlike Arjun who dies in battle, Hardy survives and becomes a public figure in the Indian government. With a national identity hardened by war, Hardy

envisions Indian restoration of prestige and dominance. His defiance of colonial power stems from his recuperation of tradition. This mirrors Uma Dey's political articulation and colonial resistance. Uma Dey, like Hardy, works within the colonial infrastructure of dominance. Serving as the British Collector's wife, she is in a subsidiary position of authority, ruling over King Thebaw and the royal family in Ratnagiri. In tracing through Uma Dey's formation of identity, and severing from her British-influenced husband, Uma liberates herself from the cycle of internalized subordination. She uses her power and concept of liberty gained in America to influence and liberate India.

I begin with Uma Dey's character when she introduces herself to King Thebaw and Queen Supayalat. Queen Supayalat, though harsh in her demeanor and judgements, praises Uma for the nature of her "self-possession" and ability to "intervene" to save the relationship between the Collector and the royal family (93). Uma has a liveliness and freshness of character that allow her to be the true intermediary between the Royal Family and the British power. Unlike her husband—the district administrator—who is tasked to deal with British affairs with the Burmese family, Uma tries to understand Burmese culture. Befriending Dolly produces this cultural interchange between Uma's Indian upbringing and Dolly's decaying life behind palace doors. Resulting from these conversations, Dolly questions Uma's loyalty to the Queen, stating, "Don't you sometimes wonder how many people have been killed in Queen Victoria's name? It must be millions wouldn't you say?" (97). For Uma, British destruction compares to that of the Burmese royal family. Dolly, in pitting these two powers against each other, unveils the double standard invoked between the British and Burmese. She further places the Burmese Queen and her "awfulness" against British brutality, prompting Uma to question her preexisting beliefs. Uma, in working within the British system of power over the exiled family, comes to see the injustice in condemning the family to life in Ratnagiri. Further, bridging the gap between two nations and states, Uma serves as an intermediary between the British and Burmese. She is bound to British loyalty through her marriage *but* also her sympathy for Dolly. With her loyalties in conflict with the First Princess's pregnancy, Uma unveils her loyalty to Burma. She keeps the First Princess's pregnancy from her husband, defying his power through wielding her own opinion and political voice. She neglects her position as the bearer of British imperial strength, power, and image; her loyalty to the welfare of the family takes precedent over her role as administrator's wife.

This act of defiance brings Uma out from under her submissive role as subject to both British and husband's rule. The First Princess's pregnancy awakens a response to the "enormity of what has been done to this family" with the "smell of miscegenation" overturning their strict enforcement of keeping races "tidily separate" (149). Uma, in keeping her knowledge of the First Princess's pregnancy to herself, undercuts British values. In turn, she loses her comfortable, western life in Ratnagiri, terminating the tenure of both her and her husband's life under the British. The British Collector, faced with charges, kills himself at sea. Uma's widowhood grants her complete freedom, allowing her to leave India for the west. This movement from India to Europe gratifies her with a freedom that she never had believed possible. She questions "why women could not think of travelling like this in India, revelling in this sense of being at liberty," but in the process of thinking about women, she thinks about freedom as a whole (163). She sees the British world as paradoxically granting "freedom by imposing subjugation" (163).

Uma then moves to America where she finds complete and utter freedom away from British oppression and etiquette that had once dictated her life. She perceives this link between the country that she once served and the subjection of her Indian country. Her life in New York gives her a political voice when she joins the League, a network of Indians who work to undercut British power in India. She explains to Dolly upon meeting after twenty years that the Indian homeland "was being set on an unbudgeable path that would thrust it inexorably in the direction of future catastrophe" (192). Here, Uma examines the destructive impact of British rule and exploitation on the country's future. Her vision of India and aspirations for a better future impact those around her, and she becomes a political activist alongside Mahatma Gandhi. Her revelations extend far past her own identity and experiences; she actively unveils the stark contrast between the British justification of "setting those people free from their bad kings and evil customs" and the act of conquering the South Asian identity. Under the guise of saving their Indian counterparts, these Indians working under British authorities were confident in aiding the British Imperial power (193). The creation of the tertiary network of Indians who perpetuate the colonial mindset of eastern inferiority is the stem of what Ghosh calls the cannibalization of culture. Uma dedicates her life to eliminating this stem of British imperialism rooted in India, pushing everything else but politics out of her life.

Conclusion

The lives of these four families are intertwined through the history which they each experience. Each generation wields their identity through its own vision of India's future. While we see a capitalism that helps further familial prosperity through Rajkumar and Neel, Dolly and Dinu represent the recapturing of past events and an appreciation for the present. Contrasting the members of the family whose memories build upon being collateralized by British forces, figures such as Arjun, Hardy, and Uma worked under British authority. Only in unveiling the guise of British power do these four characters begin to break down the network of systematized oppression. British political control hybridizes, destroys, and subjects South Asian culture. Through memories of each individual, Amitav Ghosh illuminates a dynamic, yet actively cannibalistic and self-destructive, Burmese-Indian identity.

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